

Review of the Book

Ali A. Abdi and Paul R. Carr (Eds.), *Educating for Democratic Consciousness: Counter-Hegemonic Possibilities*

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Perhaps there is no term used as frequently as a means for moral suasion than “democracy”. In 2014 alone, university students in Hong Kong demonstrated en masse against limits imposed on their federal voting rights in “democracy protests”. Analysts in the United Kingdom hailed the outcome of the Scottish referendum on independence as an exemplary of “democracy-at-work”. The US-led coalition assembled to attack the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) justified its actions at least in part as a restoration of democracy to the region. Democracy can mean many things, but its default definition as freedom with intermittent electoral procedures is what is largely produced for and consumed by citizens in the Western mainstream. Vested interests invoke this perspective of as a means to further entrench the status quo, as this hegemonic construction ensures that powers rest in power, albeit risking severe consequences. As Noam Chomsky argued in 2003, the maintenance of hegemony threatens our very survival.

The writers of *Education for Democratic Consciousness: Counter-Hegemonic Possibilities* demarcate alternatives to this mainstream stance of democracy, standpoints exemplified by resistance, reactions, and substitutes to hegemony. The title of the book itself signifies its point of departure by a tip of the hat to Paulo Freire, describing education as an exercise in broadening consciousness. The editors, Ali A. Abdi and Paul R. Carr, are themselves known both for their contributions to citizenship and democratic education in Canada, and as critical counter-hegemonic pedagogues. Abdi’s influence is visible in the vision for the book, as it extends from his scholarship on global citizenship education, decolonizing perspectives on democracy and human rights, and education and social development in the Global South. Carr’s imprint can be seen through the contestations of democracy as simply a formal, political, and electoral system. Elsewhere he has drawn the distinction between “thin” conceptualizations of democracy that are proliferated in the mainstream as largely an act of voting, and “thick” conceptualizations that actively recruit important intersections with democracy such as race, peace, and the environment (Carr, 2011). Together the editors have assembled a rich volume of contemporary thought on

democracy and education from Canadian and international perspectives.

Following an opening triad of chapters by the editors that set a conceptual departure point, the book meanders through a breadth of perspectives on democracy and education emanating from around the globe and from disciplinary perspectives. The contributions made by this book are its creative extensions of theory, its analyses of democracy and education in various nation-states, and its vivid illustrations of practices of democracy in education, including the classroom. Although not clearly delineated by these sections, the book could very well be broken down accordingly.

Chapter authors such as George J. Sefa Dei, Dennis Carlson, Peter Pericles Trifonas, M. Ayaz Naseem & Adeela Arshad-Ayaz, Randy Hoover and Noah De Lissovoy extend the theoretical boundaries of democracy, analyzing their impact on education. In chapter 4, Dei explores how indigenous knowings can reposition the very discourse of democratic education. In chapter 8, Carlson draws on the poststructuralist Marxist theory of Empire to examine how the multitude is the primary site of resistance against capitalism, a foundation for hope of Derrida’s “democracy to come”. Trifonas also relies on Derrida in chapter 10 as he examines the inherent tensions in creating democratic spaces in colonized locations of Western knowledge. For Naseem and Arshad-Ayaz in chapter 11, it is Galtung’s theories of Imperialism that are used on to dissect neo-liberal and knowledge imperialism in the internationalization and transnationalization of education. And in chapter 15, De Lissovoy outlines a new theoretical stance that proposes a redefining of democracy to encapsulate the nature of simply “being together.”

Numerous authors—Ranilce Guimarães-Iosif, Pierre Orelus, Lynette Schultz, William M. Reynolds, Angela Stienen, Carl E. James, and Vicki Macris—highlight the tensions between state-level representations of democracy and the framing of democracy within their formal education curricula. These are some of the most interesting contributions of the book for their international and comparative value. Guimarães-Iosif (chapter 5) and Orelus (chapter 6) focus on Latin



America, respectively: Brazil a “democratic state”, but one that insufficiently incorporates democracy in the education system to meet the democratic expectations for society; and Haiti, where regardless of the models of democracy integrated in formal education, the instructional language of French ensures the continued marginalization of the overwhelming majority of first-language Creole speakers. Schultz (chapter 7) and Reynolds (chapter 14) use contemporary cultural illustrations from the United States, the exemplar of Occupy Wall Street as a democratic instance demonstrating greater possibilities for “full and equitable citizenship”, and the impact of the widespread, uncritical reading of blockbuster feature films on counter-hegemonic democratic possibilities, respectively. Stienen and James (chapter 17) and Macris (chapter 18) look at examples in Europe. The former examines the tenuous links between multiculturalism and democracy in Switzerland (comparing them with those in Canada), and the latter focuses on pre-debt-crisis Greece and its issues of immigration, expressions of citizenship, and their parallels with societies outside Greece.

A third group of writers contribute chapters that envision hands-on, counter-hegemonic possibilities in teaching, pedagogy, and the classroom, such as Michael O’Sullivan, Gina Thésée, Randy Hoover, Kristina R. Llewellyn and Joel Westheimer. In chapter 12, O’Sullivan presents a case study of a school where teachers quite inadvertently resist anti-intellectual, neoliberal, and hegemonic approaches to democracy when they incorporate global citizenship education into their curriculum. Thésée, in chapter 13, could be read as a response to O’Sullivan, purporting democracy as the tool for resisting tyranny. Her pedagogical contribution is the outline of an epistemological base for democracy, encouraging action: to refuse, requisite, redefine, and reaffirm. In chapter 9, Hoover invokes the philosophy of experiential education, proposing the classroom as the optimal space to experiment with democracy. But as a “messy and imprecise” exercise, student achievement would need reconceptualising as, for one, learners would necessarily experience different democratic outcomes. The importance of focusing on learners’ perspectives is a theme that is also supported by Llewellyn and Westheimer who argue in chapter 16 that youth have “civic assets”, commitment to their communities, and democratic experiences that establish a foundation for civic education that is too infrequently recognized by democratic educators.

What bind the contributions are the authors’ starting point that hegemonic education must be challenged. They attend to issues of those students that do not benefit from status quo education, and investigate the hidden curricula that perpetuate this status quo. Yet given the breadth of topics and disparate approaches taken up in this book, it may also seem that the writings are dislocated and unrelated. Certainly these various contributions of theory, national examples, and classroom case studies would be difficult for purposes of

generalization or cross-national comparison. Among these readings, the notion of democracy is considerably stretched, even contradicted, with far reaching associations and applications.

But that’s entirely the point. Mainstream democracy continues to be represented in harmfully narrow terms. Hegemonic education perpetuates these constructions without meaningful opportunities for learners to critically engage. The counter-hegemonic perspectives of Education for Democratic Consciousness serve to disrupt the normative representations of democracy in education. It is our job as educators to explore and extend these theories and experiment with democratic possibilities in sites of learning.

References

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